

WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

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Text: A sermon related to Exodus 5:6-11 and Luke 10:25-28

CENTRAL FOCUS:

That the life of Gospel faith is inextricably a life of
connection, community, and of concern for the commonwealth.

Exodus 5:6-11: "That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, 7 "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8 But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' 9 Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will pay attention to[a] it and not to deceptive words."

10 So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh: I will not give you straw. 11 Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it, but your work will not be lessened in the least." 12 So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. 13 The taskmasters urged them on, saying, "Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw." [b] 14 And the Israelite supervisors whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them were beaten and were asked, "Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?"

Luke 10:25-28: 25 An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.[a] "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

These are the words of our ancient tradition.

May the Living Word of God in Scripture be alive within us, among us, and beyond us.

One day a man said to God, "God, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like."

God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large round table with a large pot of stew. It smelled delicious and made the man's mouth water, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles, and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.

The man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. God said, “You have seen Hell.”

Behind the second door, the room looked exactly the same. There was the large round table with the large pot of wonderful stew that made the man’s mouth water. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking.

The man said, “I don’t understand.”

God smiled and said, “It is simple. Love only requires one skill. These people learned early on to feed one another.”

Some of you may have heard that story before. It shares an important truth, an essential truth, that there is a primal dimension of life that is relational, communal, collective. We’re in this together.

Just this last week, new regulations came in from the federal government regarding the SNAP food assistance program that will likely increase the number of eligible recipients who fall off the rolls or who are unable to get on. Such measures of this administration have already accounted for 3.5 million people being pushed off the rolls and now many more are likely to lose that support.

Eight or nine years ago some federal healthcare reform proposals prompted one *Huffington Post* writer to write a post titled “I Don’t Know How to Explain to You That You Should Care About Other People.” The author was exasperated from conversations with others who did not seem to understand what it might mean to cut Medicaid and to exclude another 24 million people from health insurance.

A White House spokesperson of the time said that all those who are able bodied who might lose Medicaid can just go get jobs where there is health insurance “like you and me.” What this spokesperson didn’t seem to know is that most able-bodied people on Medicaid *do* have jobs, but, like my oldest stepson who was on Medicaid at the time and who had just started a new full-time job, those jobs don’t offer health insurance.

Professor and essayist Henry Giroux called it a *culture of cruelty*—the increasing rhetoric and policies of punishment for those who are poor or different. These kinds of proposals move us even more from a welfare state to a police state. Implicit here is a vision of culture where individualism and inequality are extreme to the point of exclusion, and where fear trumps our social bonds of solidarity to the point of attacking anything that tries to increase inclusion and care for the commonwealth.

Maybe in some ways we never had that deep sense of the collective and commonality as a nation, never included everybody really because of race or ethnicity or sex or any number of categories outside a limited norm. Certainly, we are not there yet as a nation in terms of common equality of opportunities and inclusion for education and healthcare, nor income and wealth.

This is not only in this country and is nothing new for humanity—the exclusion, the othering, the blaming, and the neglecting, oppressing, and punishing of another group or groups. The Scripture passage read from the ancient story of the Exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt shows Pharaoh, not unlike the White House spokesperson I mentioned, claiming that those who are suffering are just lazy and that they just need to complain less and work harder.

Whatever happened to “we’re in this together”? A clue to how we lose this truth lies in our readings. Remember that the 2nd half of Genesis is composed of family stories, lineage stories; Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel, and Jacob’s 12 sons including Joseph. Now Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers by the end of Genesis, ends up in Egypt where he rose to power by interpreting dreams for Pharaoh. But the beginning of next book, Exodus, says that a new pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph. Here’s when things go badly for Joseph and the Hebrews. The new Pharaoh no longer knows them, no longer sees the Hebrews as Joseph’s kin, no longer recognizes them as part of the ‘we’ of Egypt.

Things always go badly when we really don’t know each other, when we are not connected enough in relationships as community to really believe that we are in this together.

This all-together dynamic is so important that Jesus tells the lawyer who asked how to inherit eternal life, that is, what is the ultimate in life, to love neighbor as self. Jesus then, to illustrate the point, tells the story of the Samaritan, the despised one who should be excluded, who acts as the true neighbor to the injured man. Jesus tells a radical story of compassion and community that crosses borders and boundaries. Jesus draws upon the Golden Rule from Deuteronomy earlier in Luke, ‘do unto others.’ In the Good Samaritan story in Luke, he also draws upon the spirit of Deuteronomy where the theological heart of Judaic prayer and confession is expressed in the Shema, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” God’s Oneness is the spiritual bedrock for our human oneness, our togetherness. As Dr. King said in the Letter from a Birmingham Jail,

“In a real sense all life is inter-related. All are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.”

This interrelated structure of reality extends to so many levels, even including those whom we might see as isolated individuals competing against one another, those beautiful life partners on earth we call trees. University of British Columbia professor Suzanne Simard is one of many researchers who have discovered that trees are communal and communicating. She says,

“Actually, it doesn’t make evolutionary sense for trees to behave like resource-grabbing individualists. They live longest and reproduce most often in a healthy stable forest. That’s why they’ve evolved to help their neighbors.”

This realization and perception of communal connection is a proclamation that we as church must again make and live now. In the midst of such cruelty and divisiveness in federal policy proposals, in the midst of the decades-long drift toward increased individual isolation and survivalism, we as church are called to embody and uplift community and communion. Indeed, the very first thing that the early Christian community did after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) was to share all things in common and to meet everyone’s need.

And that is only possible when we see ourselves in others, when we realize our commonality, and the built-in nature of our mutuality. When we say with Rev. Dr. King that I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be, we have brought together individual value and dignity with the essential value and reality of the communal. We’re in this together.

At Plymouth, we said it in our Campus Task Force reports. We said it in the streets of The Cities during Operation Metro Surge. We are saying it every time we gather in a congregational meeting like we will in a few moments. We're in this together.

Our witness as a community of faith is as important now as it has ever been when we uplift and live out the simple sacred truth that we are in this together.

May today's meeting as a congregation and our living in the days to come grow from the deep truth of life that we are in this together.

AMEN